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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2001, the Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA) began a new initiative called the Partnership for Literacy. In this implementation study, teachers from a range of middle schools in Wisconsin and New York worked in partnership with each other and with an instructional facilitator to adopt and adapt strategies that have previously been shown to improve student achievement in English Language Arts. Researchers capture classroom interactions and other artifacts of student achievement throughout the academic year, with results to be analyzed and published at the conclusion of the 2-year study. Though only midway through the project, teachers, facilitators, and classroom observers have already begun to notice changes. Teachers have adapted and extended the strategies, bringing to them their own knowledge base. This article features the work in one such classroom, a seventh grade class in an urban neighborhood, from the three aspects of the partnership: the classroom teacher, the researcher, and the instructional facilitator. The article explains how the teacher devoted a majority of the first two months to discipline and creating an environment in which students felt at ease asking and answering questions, raising concerns, and debating issues. To do this, she selected literature that spoke to the students. With students more interested in the literature, writing responses to the book evolved naturally. (Contains 28 references and 13 endnotes.) (PM)

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Keeping Expectations High While Helping Lower-Achieving Students Meet Them.

ED 477 852

Melissa Anderson, Laura Morrill and Mary Adler

From *English Update*, Fall 2002.

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English UPDATE
A Newsletter from the Center on English Learning & Achievement
FALL 2002

Helping lower-achieving students reach high expectations

Melissa Anderson, Mary Adler and Laura Morrill

Melissa's classroom in action

In the Spring of 2001, CELA began an initiative called the Partnership for Literacy. In this implementation study, teachers from a range of middle schools in Wisconsin and New York work in partnership with each other and an instructional facilitator to adopt and adapt strategies that have previously been shown to improve student achievement in English Language Arts. Researchers capture classroom interactions and other artifacts of student achievement throughout the academic year, with results to be analyzed and published at the conclusion of the two-year study.[1]

Though we are only midway through the project, teachers, facilitators, and classroom observers have already begun to notice changes. Teachers have adapted and extended the strategies, bringing to them their own knowledge base, including their understanding of their particular students, classrooms, and community contexts.

The following article features the work in one such classroom. Its authors represent the three aspects of the Partnership: Melissa Anderson, the classroom teacher; Mary Adler, the instructional facilitator; and Laura Morrill, the classroom researcher.

A Challenging Class

Melissa teaches at Harrison Middle School,[2] which is situated in what was once a working- to middle-class urban neighborhood that has suffered in recent years from middle-class flight to suburban districts with reputations for better schools. Despite these challenges, the teachers at the school, in cooperation with the district, volunteered to become part of the Partnership and take on the extra work that would involve. Melissa deliberately chose to try the new strategies with one of her lower-performing groups that she felt would benefit most from this extra focus. This particular class included twenty seventh graders, five of whom were special education inclusion students and two of whom were designated Limited English Proficient. Only four read at or near grade level, with the rest lagging two or more years behind; four read at a second or third grade level. In a reading interest survey administered early in the year, only one of seventeen students responding said that she read often in her spare time. Seven reported that in their spare time, they chose not to read at all, while six students claimed to read sometimes. During one of our visits early in the school year, Melissa introduced a book she was planning to teach with the words, "I read this over the weekend." The students' responses were telling: "How can you read that fast? How many pages is it? Didn't you do anything else? Why did you do that?" Not surprisingly, for a majority of the students, their writing levels reflected their reading levels.

All of which posed some daunting questions for Melissa: How could she help her students engage in the kinds of literary conversations that could help them become better readers, writers, and thinkers, when the literature seemed inaccessible to them? How could she address their lack of skills while also developing higher-order thinking? Finally, how could she support them and help them work to meet her high expectations, rather than lowering her expectations?

It was evident within the beginning weeks of the school year that students in

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on the web at http://cela.albany.edu

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Melissa's class struggled with reading and writing. They did not acknowledge the basics of classroom behavior and etiquette and would often leave the classroom for the bathroom or nurse or dawdle in from the lunchroom, apparently in an attempt to avoid the work at hand. Writing assignments produced work of minimal length (often less than five sentences) filled with errors in mechanics and coherence. They seemed to lack not only the skills needed for success but also the confidence and drive to achieve beyond their self-imposed limitations.

The Transformation Began with One Text

Melissa devoted a majority of the first two months to discipline and creating an environment in which students felt at ease asking and answering questions, raising concerns, and debating issues. To do this, she selected literature that spoke to the students, such as newspaper clippings about the death of popular singer Aaliyah and "Seventh Grade," a short story by Gary Soto. The real transformation began in October, however, with *Money Hungry* by Sharon G. Flake.

This novel, about a young African-American teen living in the ghetto and written in Black vernacular, opened the door to critical conversation. Responding to it, students eagerly jotted down notes and often interrupted Melissa's oral reading to make comments or ask questions. Melissa took advantage of these opportunities to probe more deeply into the text, resulting in literary discussions about story elements such as characters' motivations.

With students so interested in the book, writing about it evolved naturally. Initially, Melissa accepted all written work, but as the conversations became more critical, more mature, she demanded more in-depth, longer responses, while continuously praising the work received. Interestingly, when presented with this new challenge, students met and sometimes exceeded Melissa's expectations, for example sometimes doing more homework than she assigned. Now that she had their attention, Melissa could infuse lessons with a focus on complex literary elements, such as author's style, language usage, and literary terms. *Money Hungry*, in particular, provided a rich opportunity to discuss the effects of the use of non-standard English. Students completed response sheets focusing not only on the facts of the story, but also on predicting, making connections to their lives, and developing literary appreciation by finding lines from the literature that moved them or seemed important in some way. As an assessment for the book, students wrote letters to the author and completed an open-notes test that involved short-responses to critical questions.

Not surprisingly, with this

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FOR PARENTS

As CELA researchers have analyzed findings across many studies over the past several years, a framework for successful English instruction has emerged. It suggests that in the most effective English–classes, ***dialogic instruction*** is orchestrated to support ***envisionment-building classrooms*** centered around ***curricular conversations about challenging subject matter***. On the following page of this issue of *English Update*, we attempt to unpack and translate this statement into parent-friendly language and explain what it means. We hope that you will find it useful and that you will reproduce it and share it with parents if it helps to describe the kind of instruction their children will experience in your classroom. The text can also be downloaded from http://cela.albany.edu.

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The Center on English Learning & Achievement is the national research center dedicated to improving student learning and achievement in English as it is learned as a subject and in the other academic disciplines. The Center is operated by the University at Albany, State University of New York, in partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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THE CRITICAL ROLE OF
conversation in learning

Research shows that the kind of instruction that leads to the greatest gains in student achievement in reading, writing, and other literacy skills involves talk.* Overall, researchers have found that in the most effective English classes, students engage in ***dialogue*** with their teacher and with each other as they build ever deeper and broader ***understandings***, or ***envisionments***. These ***conversations*** are critical to student learning, but it is also critical that conversations be about ***important topics*** and ***challenging subject matter***.

What is dialogue?

By dialogue, we mean classroom discussion — real discussion in which students exchange questions and ideas with each other and with the teacher. Dialogue has been shown to improve student achievement in both reading and writing. Teachers can foster this kind of dialogue by

- asking questions that require students to develop interpretation or analysis of a passage, and to defend their conclusions in light of conflicting points of view,
- inviting students to respond to each other's ideas,
- asking follow-up questions that prod students to think more broadly or deeply or to make connections to something else they have read or seen or know about.

What are envisionments?

Making sense of new information is a process of asking questions, relating new information to old, forming hypotheses and later revisiting them, and reinterpreting previous understandings. The result of this process of developing understanding is called envisionment-building. An envisionment encompasses all that we understand about a selection (a printed text, movie, lecture, etc.) at a particular point in time, and it will continue to change as we do more reading, writing, listening, and talking. Effective classrooms:

- treat questions as a natural (and essential) part of coming to understand something,
- use class time to help students develop understandings, explore possibilities and build interpretations, and
- invite and welcome many perspectives to provoke analyses and enrich interpretations.

Why curricular conversation?

English teachers teach many things: literature, grammar, spelling and composition, research skills, library usage, letter writing, word processing, and internet searching. The most effective English courses are not just collections of activities or units. They are year-long conversations about important topics that matter. An effective English course teaches the vocabulary of the discipline, the conventional ways to speak and write within it, and how to argue a point with the kind of evidence that will be effective. In the best English classes, this means that students talk with others about important issues and ideas, read challenging selections, and ask and answer questions about those selections. We can think of all these activities as being part of a "conversation." To be effective, though, these conversations must:

- **be about a topic worth talking about**. They should draw on and refer to materials that suit the purpose, are up to date, well written, and meaty enough to provoke discussion and debate.
- **help students relate what they are learning in one unit or lesson to other things they have studied or experienced.** It is important for the teacher to make sure that students see the connections to previous learning. Today's discussion should build on earlier work, and become the foundation for tomorrow's, next week's, and next month's work.
- **teach students how to take part in the conversation by teaching them the knowledge and skills they need**, including effective strategies for taking a position, making an argument, and evaluating evidence presented by others.

* Much of this research has been conducted at the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA), funded by the U.S. Department of Education. CELA is located at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Their research can be found at http://cela.albany.edu.

How can parents help?

Students at all grade levels can benefit from engaging in conversations that respect their points of view and that encourage them to think more deeply and to make connections to other knowledge and experiences. These conversations help to clarify thinking and ideas, and develop important language skills that are positively related to reading comprehension and writing achievement.

These conversations can begin with a shared experience — a TV program, video, or movie, book, an event, a piece of art or music — anything that invites questions and an exploration of ideas and understandings. It is important to respect the child's point of view and to ask questions that encourage the child to think more deeply and more broadly, and to make connections to other knowledge.

Questions you can ask

- What was your favorite part? Why?
- Did anything surprise you?
- What were you thinking at the end of the book (video, movie, piece of music)?
- I wonder why the writer (director, painter, composer) . . . ?
- What part stood out for you? Why?
- Did anything in this book (painting, musical piece, movie) remind you of other things we have done? Someone we know?

A history of skills-based instruction for lower achieving students

Research on lower track classes suggests that such students have traditionally been relegated to a skills-based curriculum with little or no stimulation of higher order thinking and writing. Nystrand & Gamoran[3] found that low-achieving eighth and ninth grade students reported a greater frequency of grammar exercises as well as fill in the blank assignments, true-false questions, and multiple choice questions. Later findings[4] showed how this translates into instruction: In eighth grade, teachers lectured to low track students 40% more often than they did to higher achieving students. More lecture means less time for discussion; though rare in any context, lower-track classrooms were half as likely as higher track classes to include discussion.[5] These findings are consistent with Nieto's observations about the lack of agency for students (and teachers) in low-income schools. In such contexts, "teachers learn that their primary responsibility is to 'teach the basics' because students are thought to have neither the innate ability nor the experiential background of more privileged students."[6]

By contrast, Langer[7] shows us how a literature- and discussion-rich classroom can have relevance and meaning for students who are at risk for school failure. Because it uses a narrative discourse similar to that used in students' homes, literature has the potential to reduce the gaps between home and school. Literature that reflects students' backgrounds and experiences is likely to help make these connections.[8] By selecting such texts, and teaching students how to think about and discuss them in academic ways, teachers help students to "call upon language and literacy strategies and ways of thinking that they know and use — in a context where what they know is sanctioned."[9]

The accompanying article is about the journey that Melissa and her students took during a year in which they learned to discuss and write about literature in increasingly complex ways. Melissa helped them to accomplish this not by loosening standards but by providing scaffolding[10] that would help her students to develop strategies for effective reading and writing. Her entryway, her point of contact, came through sanctioning students' knowledge and experience by selecting literature that resonated for them, using the resulting discussions to develop their skills and strategies through meaningful activity.

High expectations

increased interest in meaningful literature, discipline became less of an issue. As the year progressed, we began to see evidence of improved understanding through oral interpretation, increased discussion, less time off-task, and shorter and less frequent trips out of the classroom. Students who would not contribute at the beginning of the year started to volunteer answers and make comments. They became more engaged with the reading, especially in making predictions, an important strategy for struggling readers to develop.[11]

In response to the students' developing ability to handle more complex ideas, Melissa was more often able to ask authentic questions and use other effective discussion strategies. From the beginning, Melissa showed respect for all students' questions and comments, even those that clearly indicated a lack of understanding of the material. She treated all questions as legitimate, explaining, "If students ask, they want to know." She listened carefully to student statements, rephrased them in question form, and then used student responses to build discussion (a strategy known as "uptake"). Melissa also took advantage of opportunities to have students explain text to each other: "Kyesha, would you tell James what just happened, please?"

Connections: Building on and Maintaining Success

Money Hungry, especially, served as a reference point for the remainder of the year. The protagonist, Raspberry Hill, was discussed in relation to characters in other books. Moreover, each reviewed skill, such as using figurative language, was linked back to Flake's book, and new readings helped students think again about their interpretations of *Money Hungry*. As students read other engaging texts, they began making connections across genres and selections. For instance, they noticed that the suspense techniques used in *The Girl Who Owned a City* by O.T. Nelson (studied in April) were not that far removed from those in *Money Hungry*. Also in April, a discussion of the short story, "The Game of Catch," began with students commenting about their disappointment with the ending. They then made comparisons to the endings of previous class readings. Javier connected the two novels by critiquing them, as a reader would, for their lack of resolution: In his words, "We didn't find out what happened at the end."

The ongoing attention to language and structure created a larger curricular conversation[12] that used *Money Hungry* as its touchstone. The curriculum itself created coherence across the academic year while also enabling other elements that contributed to continuity: a classroom culture in which discussions endured over time and in which students had the freedom to ask and answer questions.

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Slowly, with each lesson, Melissa increased her expectations for both standards of discussion and for writing. From a news article written in response to Aaliyah's death and a letter in response to *Money Hungry*, students moved to four paragraph standard essays (likely to be very important in future classes and on standardized literacy assessments). Students knew that Melissa wholeheartedly believed in their ability to achieve this goal. As she told them, "I don't want paragraphs, I want 'pAAAragraphs'!" Translation: "Show me some thought and substance." To assist in this process, the class dissected student essays, highlighting the aspects well done and adding in necessary pieces that had been left out. Slowly, through repetition, peer editing, teacher conferencing, and positive feedback, students began to learn how to express their thoughts on paper in a coherent, clear manner.

Ladson-Billings argues that allowing students to achieve less than the standard expectations is a destructive strategy, especially for students of color who are struggling academically, as were many in Melissa's class. Rather, she suggests that teachers who practice a culturally relevant pedagogy adopt many of the strategies we glimpsed in Melissa's classroom. These effective teachers, Ladson-Billings explains, "believe that all of their students can succeed rather than that failure is inevitable for some."[13] They help students make connections and create a curriculum rich with cultural and racial identities. By doing this and by scaffolding ways to think about and discuss these texts, Melissa found a way to connect with this challenging group of students without lowering her expectations.

Postscript from Melissa

I was as much a student as a teacher this year, for through the Partnership I learned many important lessons regarding planning, assessment, and strategies. For the most part, I attribute a large portion of my success to highly engaging literature, written at an appropriate reading level, starring protagonists with whom students could relate. Secondly, I realized that it was never necessary to compromise my expectations; students intrinsically desire to achieve. Allowing students not to complete work or to hand in less than their grade-level peers is essentially enabling them to achieve less. Although the work in this class was rigorous, the goals of the class were anchored in a climate that fostered community, love, humor, hard work, inquiry, and cooperation. Students came to care as much about their work as I did.

[1] As described in previous issues of *English Update* and on the CELA website (http://cela.albany.edu), the Partnership for Literacy involves working with teachers in two cohorts of schools. Participating teachers (70 in all) work with instructional facilitators during an initial one week institute, with follow-up, after school meetings throughout the year. The focus of the implementation is on instructional changes and teacher reflection on the effectiveness of the changes. Student achievement (pre and post) in both cohorts is being measured and compared. One cohort, including Melissa, began its work in 2001, the other, in 2002.
[2] The school and all student names are pseudonyms.
[3] 1988, as cited in Nystrand 1997, p. 48.
[4] Nystrand 1997.
[5] Nystrand et al. 2001.
[6] Nieto, 2000, p. 44.
[7] 1995.
[8] Ladson-Billings 1994.
[9] Langer 1995, p. 118.
[10] For more on scaffolding, see the article on page 6.
[11] Wilhelm 1995; Greenleaf, et al. 2001.
[12] Applebee 1996.
[13] 1994.

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Scaffolding from page 6

are reciprocal teaching;[10] procedural facilitation in the teaching of writing;[11] environmental mode of instruction in the teaching of writing;[12] use of culturally specific language routines to support the development of academic literacy;[13] and a variety of approaches to prompted and structured computer assisted tasks in mathematics, science, and literacy learning.[14]

Because it has proven to be a powerful tool in thinking about effective instruction across a wide range of contexts, the use of appropriate scaffolding to help diverse students undertake new and more difficult tasks is an important element in the planning and development of instructional activities.

[1] Wood et al. 1976; Bruner 1978; Cazden 1979.
[2] E.g., Bransford, Brown & Cocking 1999.
[3] E.g., Lave & Wenger 1991; Lee 1993, 1995; Rogoff 1990.
[4] Vygotsky 1962.
[5] Dyson 1994; Kamberelis & Bovino 1999; Lee 1995; Ladson-Billings 1995; Miller & Legge 1999.
[6] Applebee & Langer 1983; Langer & Applebee 1986.
[7] 1988.
[8] 1995.
[9] 2001.
[10] Palincsar & Brown 1984.
[11] Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987.
[12] Hillocks 1986.
[13] Lee 1993, 1995.
[14] Bransford, Brown & Cocking 1999.
[15] This article is his article is abridged from a fuller discussion of scaffolding and other features of effective instruction on which the Partnership for Literacy is based. These can be found at http://cela.albany.edu/research.htm.

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LOOK FOR US AT . . .

New York State English Council Annual Conference
October 17-19, Albany, NY – M. Adler, E. Boncordo, E. Close, J. Marino, K. Millet-Wilson, P. O'Connor, E. Rougle.

36th Annual Meeting of the Oral History Association
Oct 23-27, San Diego, CA – M. Albert, M. Jury.

National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention
November 21-24, Atlanta, GA – M. Adler, J. Agee, A. Applebee, E. Close, J. Harbeck, E. Kaiser, J. Langer, J. Marino, M. Nystrand, E. Rougle, P. Smagorinsky.

Highlights: Please join CELA researchers and staff at the following Saturday (Nov. 23) sessions:

11:00 a.m. Current Research Findings from CELA
5:45 p.m. Presentation, Conversation, Reception

and in the Hilton Exhibit Hall: **Booth #1404**

American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting
November 20-24, New Orleans, LA – J. Collins.

National Reading Conference
December 4-7, Miami, FL – M. Albert,R. Allington, J. Collins, C. Dozier, G. Goatley, P. Johnston, G. Kamberelis, L. de la Luna, V. Machado, I. Rutten, E. Yanoff.

National Staff Development Council Annual Meeting
December 7-11, Boston, MA – J. Marino.

QUIG Conference on Interdisciplinary Qualitative Studies
January, 2003, Athens, GA – L. Cook, V. Pettis, P. Smagorinsky.

NCTE Assembly for Research Midwinter Conference
February, 2003, Minneapolis, MN – G. Ladson-Billings.

For more information about these presentations, check the upcoming presentation information on our website.

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